

Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council
Best Available Science Review Standard Operating Procedures
Interim 2018 version

Introduction

Under the RESTORE Act, proposals and grant/interagency agreement (IAA) applications for Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (Council)-Selected Restoration Component (“Bucket 2”) funds and Spill Impact Component (“Bucket 3”) funds must be based on and conducted according to “best available science” (BAS). BAS is defined in the RESTORE Act as science that “maximizes the quality, objectivity, and integrity of information, including statistical information; uses peer-reviewed and publicly available data; and clearly documents and communicates risks and uncertainties in the scientific basis for such projects” (see 33 U.S.C. 1321(a)(27)). The Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (Council) supports a process for external independent scientific review of project proposals and applicable¹ project and program grant/IAA applications to address this requirement. Following the identification by Council Science Staff of the need for BAS review, each proposal/application is independently reviewed by at least three external expert science reviewers. In general, one reviewer is from the Gulf state most directly linked to the proposal/application, and the other two are from another state in the Gulf of Mexico region (the states of Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas), or from outside of the Gulf of Mexico region.

Science Reviewer Criteria and Reviewer Confidentiality/Conflict of Interest

Criteria for the science reviewers were developed by the Council Science Staff. These establish general qualifications for reviewers, which are that: (1) there should be no conflicts of interest (see Appendix 3), (2) reviewers remain anonymous, and (3) all review comments can be made publicly available on the Council’s website. It is a common government practice to conduct anonymous proposal reviews; this permits reviewers to provide candid, impartial comments without concern for potential pressure or retaliation. The names and affiliations of reviewers remain anonymous to the extent permitted by law. To promote transparency in the BAS process, the summary qualifications of the entire pool of reviewers are made available to Council members for review, in addition to all review comments .

Science Reviewer Selection

Science reviewers for Council-funded projects are derived from several sources including, but not limited to, the following:

Previous Council Reviewers:

In 2014-2015, under the direction of the Council Science Staff, a broad pool of expert volunteer science reviewers were used to evaluate Council-funded project applications. The pool of experts was derived from funded RESTORE and other *Deepwater Horizon* activities, regional associations, the National Academies of Sciences, Sea Grant, the National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR)

¹ As described in the [Council’s State Expenditure Plan Guidelines](#), consideration of BAS is not required for projects/programs where it is not meaningful, such as in connection with administrative activities. The need for external BAS review of proposals/applications will be determined by Council Science Staff.

System, National Estuary Programs, the Gulf of Mexico Alliance, numerous universities nationwide, and public websites.

New Reviewers:

In 2017, the Council contracted with the Gulf of Mexico Alliance (GOMA) and the Gulf of Mexico University Research Collaborative (GOMURC) to identify and solicit additional science evaluations for Council-funded projects funded under Buckets 2 and 3.

Process for New Reviewers:

An invitation letter to become a science reviewer along with an application (Appendix 1) is distributed to GOMA and GOMURC's network of contacts and universities, regional restoration organizations in the Gulf, regional non-governmental organization (NGO) scientists, and Council contacts. This generates a pool of potential reviewers (categorized by disciplinary expertise) that is stored in the Council's database for consideration for project reviews as needed. Under Bucket 2, reviewers are generally selected and assigned as the Council develops new and updated funded priority lists (FPLs). Under Bucket 3, since states submit projects for review on a rolling basis, reviewers are selected and assigned as the need arises.

GOMURC staff identify at least three potential reviewers for each specific project based on a thorough review of the proposal's or application's scope, outcomes, and referenced literature. Once reviewers are identified, GOMURC staff submit the reviewer nominees for review by GOMA staff and the Council Science Staff for checks on conflicts of interest, qualifications, and approval. If GOMA staff or Council Science Staff indicate any issues with reviewer nominees, replacement/alternative reviewer(s) are identified as soon as possible and again receive final approval by the Council Science Staff.

General criteria used to guide identification of three reviewer nominees per project include:

- Professional qualifications including relevant advanced degrees and/or professional experience and skills related to science and restoration.
- Disciplinary expertise appropriate for proposed project scope and objectives.
- Diversity of reviewers from in-state, region, and outside the Gulf region.
- No conflicts of interest.

GOMURC staff notify selected reviewers individually via email to confirm interest and availability to conduct the reviews (Appendix 2), and send a Reviewer Application if they have not yet completed one (Appendix 1). The reviewer must complete a second check for conflicts of interest once they have reviewed an executive summary of the project description.

External Reviewer Guidance and Process

Once reviewers are approved, they are individually trained with a live or recorded webinar that explains the Council's overall project review process, the reviewer's role in the BAS review process, how to identify conflicts of interest, and what their obligations are as a reviewer (anonymity, confidentiality, timeline and paperwork requirements for completion and payment). The webinar provides an opportunity to answer questions about the process before the reviewer begins their review. The webinar emphasizes that the evaluation is not a National Science Foundation-style evaluation where the project will be scored according to merit, but rather a

more qualitative review to identify weaknesses in technical approach or methods or other deficiencies. An overview of the Science Evaluation form (Appendix 4) highlights that the form can accommodate all relevant comments since the form includes text boxes that allow reviewers to include all their comments, in addition to containing specific questions to answer. The webinar informs reviewers that their names and affiliations will be anonymous, but that the content of their reviews may be posted verbatim to the Council website. Participants are encouraged to contact GOMA or GOMURC staff at any time with any additional process questions; however, staff are unable to address any subject-matter content questions in connection with the proposal/application. Reviewers are asked to note any questions they may have on proposals/applications in the comments section of their review forms.

When reviewers have completed the training, they must sign the Conflict of Interest Disclosure and the Training Verification form (Appendix 3) to certify they are conflict-free and understand their responsibilities as a reviewer. Reviewers must submit all signed forms to GOMURC staff. Once all required forms are received, reviewers are provided with all project documentation (complete project description, budget, and other supplemental information) and the review form (Appendix 4). A reviewer's completion of the training and submission of all required forms starts the clock on the two-week window the reviewer is given to complete the reviews.

During the review process, GOMURC staff remind reviewers of upcoming deadlines, works with reviewers to answer process questions, ensures reviews are completed, and reassigns reviews as needed in the case that a reviewer cannot complete their assignment as planned. Upon GOMURC's receipt of completed and approved reviews, reviewers submit payment forms directly to GOMA for processing.

Once all three reviews are complete, a separate one page summary (MS Word document) of the three reviews is generated by GOMURC staff that highlights where reviewers agreed or disagreed on elements of the project, using supporting quotes where relevant to underscore particular concerns. Names, along with other potentially identifying information, are removed from the forms by GOMURC staff. Reviewers are only contacted in cases where there is a need to clarify review content. For example, if a quote used in a review is potentially unclear, a reviewer could be asked if they are comfortable with the quote as-is or if they want it modified. If no reply is provided to the question, it is assumed that the reviewer is comfortable with the statement as-is, and no modification is needed. Reviews are then locked as no-longer-fillable PDF forms. The full content of the reviews, excepting reviewer-identifying information, and the one-page summary are provided to the Council Science Staff and may be made publicly available in their entirety on the Council's website.

Council Staff Summary Review Process

Based upon the external reviews and summary review document from GOMURC staff, Council Science Staff will complete a BAS assessment through the Council's Restoration Assistance and Awards Management System (RAAMS), and provide the summary review document to the applicant. If appropriate, Council Science Staff will request applicants to respond to the summarized comments in a BAS Review Comment Response Document. Council Science Staff will review this Response Document internally and work with applicants to provide final BAS approval for the proposal or application.

Appendix 1: Potential Reviewer Solicitation Email and application form

Dear Colleague,

We invite you to engage in the independent science review of Gulf of Mexico ecosystem restoration projects and programs being considered for funding by the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (Council), which is an independent Federal entity established under the Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States Act (RESTORE Act) (33 U.S.C. 1321(t) and note).

The Gulf of Mexico Alliance (GOMA) and Gulf of Mexico University Research Collaborative (GOMURC) have contracted with the Council to conduct scientific reviews of projects and programs funded under the RESTORE Act Council-funded Restoration and Spill Impact Components (for more see information on the Components, see <http://www.gulfofmexicoalliance.org/learn-more/gulf-restoration/#RESTORE>). The Council is charged with using a portion of these funds to implement priority restoration projects and programs across the Gulf that are based on the best available science (BAS).

Accordingly, we seek reviewers to conduct independent, anonymous, and unbiased science reviews of proposed restoration projects and programs. Each proposal will be reviewed by three independent experts. We expect proposals to range in size and amount requested. Approved reviewers will need to complete their review within two weeks to receive a stipend of \$500 per review.

Final selection and assignment of reviewers will be based on qualifications and lack of conflicts of interest, to be confirmed prior to review assignments. Desired qualifications include:

- academic and/or professional experience related to science and restoration,
- relevant advanced degrees, and
- experience derived from on-the-ground implementation of coastal restoration projects and programs.

Potential reviewers are not automatically disqualified from becoming a reviewer if participating on a proposal with a Council Member or if there may be some other potential conflict of interest. The Council has a clear conflict of interest policy and we will address such issues when assigning proposals to reviewers. Also, please note that the identities of reviewers will not be disclosed to Council members or the general public. The content of reviews will be available to Council members and possibly to the general public; however, the names and affiliations of reviewers will remain anonymous.

We expect to receive projects and programs for review from the Council intermittently over the next three years. Potential reviewers will be added to our database and contacted as these requests are processed, so we will be in touch as needed. Prior to distribution of projects and programs for review, we will host a webinar to orient reviewers on the background, process, and expectations for the review.

If you are interested in serving as a reviewer, please complete the attached application form. Return the form via email with your Curriculum Vitae to GOMURC@usf.edu. Please put "BAS Reviewer Application" in the subject line of your return email. We will confirm receipt. We also appreciate your help in building this review community by forwarding this application to other qualified individuals.

Thanks for your consideration of this request. If you have questions on any of this, please contact Cara Cooper at caracooper@usf.edu.

Respectfully,
Cara Cooper,
Coordinator, Gulf of Mexico University Research Collaborative (GOMURC)

cc: Laura Bowie, Director, GOMA
Jessica Henkel, Science Advisor, RESTORE Council

Appendix 2: Approved Project/Program Reviewer Potential Assignment Message Template

Dear Dr. XXXXX,

On behalf of the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (Council), we are administering the Best Available Science Review process for approved projects coming from Council members. As part of this process, each project will be anonymously reviewed by three experts who will answer questions about the project's use of science. *Reviewers will be compensated for their time, with a fee of \$500 per project reviewed.* We have identified you as one of the leading experts in your field, who would be a valuable reviewer for the following project: **XXXXXXXX**.

Each reviewer will be required to view a brief training PowerPoint that explains the process and reviews the Conflict of Interest policy. You will also be required to sign a Conflict of Interest (COI) statement and training verification form. Once you have completed and submitted the COI statement and verification form, you will be asked to use a PDF evaluation form to conduct your review, which includes addressing a series of questions about the use of science in the project. You will have a period of **two weeks** to conduct the review. You will be paid upon completion of your review.

If you do not anticipate any conflicts of interest with your participation in the project and are available to conduct the review, please let me know no later than [DATE] since we will be beginning training next week. If you are unavailable, please let me know ASAP so we can select another reviewer.

If you have any questions, please just let me know.

Thank you,

Cara Cooper

GOMURC, Subject Matter Expert Coordinator